

“...and followed they did”: Women’s Perspectives on the Changing Frontier

**By Maureen Devine
University of Klagenfurt**

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Starting from the basic assumptions that 1) “the frontier” from its very beginnings has been a male-centered adventure story, and that 2) numerous male writers -- from the earliest explorers and adventurers who kept diaries and wrote reports up to the novelists like James Fennimore Cooperr -- were very conscious of myth-making possibilities concerning the frontier, this paper first briefly reviews the research of the last 3 decades on the literature of frontier women, particularly regarding the different perceptions women had of the frontier and their specific contribution to frontier literature. Then turning to the contributions of basically 2 women, Caroline Kirkland and Eliza Farnham, who wrote extensively about their experiences on the frontier of the 1840s and 1850s, the paper discusses 3 characteristic tropes in women’s frontier writing of the mid-1800s: the “tradition of apologia” (Georgi-Findlay), frontier as garden motif, and the perception of Natives as a doomed race. Finally, raising the question of why the women’s perspective on the concept of the frontier still tends to be politely ignored in spite of the fact the fact that Anglo-European women “followed” on the frontier from earliest colonial times, one answer suggested is that the realities of frontier life for the vast majority of pioneers, male and female, could in no way compete with the already established myths, and in the 19th century it was the myth of the frontier, in the face of - and because of - its rapid demise, that was of overriding importance.